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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: PARTY POLITICS INSIDE AND OUT: TWO POLITICIANS
VIEWS

Classified By: DCM Pamela Spratlen: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The Charge met on December 5 with the Secretary of the Nur Otan party, Yerlan Karin. In the surprisingly frank three-hour meeting, Karin readily admitted that Nur Otan's monopoly on power tarnishes Kazakhstan's democratic credentials. In his view, single-party rule is not sustainable, and Nur Otan will eventually split into several parties. Karin wants Nur Otan to develop a solid party platform and resolve citizens' concerns, rather than simply serve as President Nazarbayev's "propaganda machine." Karin acknowledged that the Presidential Administration sets policy, but asserted President Nazarbayev's openness to suggestions from his liberal advisors. The leader of the opposition Ak Zhol party, by contrast, sees little opportunity for input on the policy process.
END SUMMARY.

12. (C) On December 5, the CDA met with Nur Otan party Secretary Yerlan Karin on his invitation. The 33-year-old Karin, a political scientist by training, came to the President's Nur Otan party in November 2008 from the Internal Policy department of the Presidential Administration. In Nur Otan's hierarchy, he is one of two secretaries reporting to the party's deputy chairman, who in turn reports to President Nazarbayev. Although he usually keeps a low public profile, Karin is believed to be the party's policy strategist and is credited with Nur Otan's recent push to cement its credentials as a bona fide political party. Further bio details reported septel.

NUR OTAN DEVELOPING TIES TO CIVIL SOCIETY

13. (C) During a three-hour meeting and lunch, Karin freely and frankly discussed his views of the Nur Otan party, decision-making in the Presidential Administration, and the future of democratic reform in the country. Karin readily admitted that Nur Otan's monopoly on power tarnishes Kazakhstan's democratic credentials, but "it is a fact of life for the moment." He aims to compensate through the creation of greater democracy within the party itself and increased responsiveness to citizens' concerns. Karin described his initiative for Nur Otan to establish consultative councils with pro-government opposition parties and leading NGOs. The "radical" opposition parties declined to participate, because they feared being seen as abandoning their principles, he said.

PARTY AS A "DEMOCRACY SCHOOL"?

14. (C) In his relaxed and frank way, Karin told us that he does not consider single-party rule sustainable, and that Nur Otan will

eventually split into separate parties -- "It's a question of time." Nur Otan's weakness is that "it's trying to be all things to all people" and avoiding taking a committed stance on tougher issues, like the question of Kazakhstan's identity as a multi-ethnic state versus Kazakh nationalism. At the same time, he sees the party as "good democracy training. The government (executive branch) works in isolation. It sets its own priorities without consulting" with civil society or the electorate. "As a party, you are constantly exposed to criticism, forced to defend your policies," he said. He conveyed his initial ambivalence when "asked" to leave the administration for the party. However, he now believes he can "still make a difference." He believes Nur Otan must evolve from a "propaganda machine" for President Nazarbayev to a party that uses its political power to resolve "real issues. You cannot wait for the system to reform itself," he asserted, "you must push it forward." At the same time, he readily acknowledged that "policy is set at the Ak Orda (the presidential administration)" and not by the parliament or political parties.

PRESIDENT OPEN TO LIBERAL IDEAS ...

15. (C) The CDA asked whether others in the Nur Otan establishment share Karin's liberal-leaning views. Karin joked that convincing others in the party leadership is "extremely delicate work." He underlined the comparative openness of regional party leaders to Karin's ideas, specifically because "they hear the criticism" from the population. However, according to Karin, President Nazarbayev is willing to hear such views. He highlighted a two-hour audience with the President during his tenure at the Presidential Administration when Nazarbayev explicitly solicited his views. Karin apparently told Nazarbayev that Nur Otan would benefit from greater openness, transparency, and accountability. He suggested that Nazarbayev give

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up his position as the head of Nur Otan, as a sitting President, and serve instead as the arbitrator of the whole political process. Karin said he was elated after the meeting, because "the President really listened." He admitted, however, that one "must be around the President all the time" to translate ideas into policy. When he moved to Nur Otan, Karin lost that access. (NOTE: Karin did not indicate that a connection existed between his frankness with the President and his subsequent move away from Ak Orda to Nur Otan. END NOTE.)

... BUT OPPOSITION SEES FEW OPPORTUNITIES

16. (C) On December 7, the CDA met with the Alikhan Baimenov, leader of the Ak Zhol opposition party. In contrast with the free-flowing conversation with Karin, Baimenov was reserved and careful in his comments. He told the CDA that President Nazarbayev and his Nur Otan party tightly control the political space in Kazakhstan, leaving little room for input from opposition parties. Asked about potential avenues of influence in such a constricted political environment, Baimenov did not have an answer readily available. He said, however, that Ak Zhol is focusing on the issue of Kazakh language and identity due to the growing frustration among some Kazakhs at the government's perceived slow progress in elevation of the use of Kazakh language. He noted opposition to the recently-announced Doctrine of National Unity, which calls for a development of a "civil" -- rather than ethnic -- Kazakhstani identity. Baimenov asserted that many Kazakhs consider this policy a threat to the future of their language and culture. Ak Zhol supported an open letter to President Nazarbayev from approximately 200 Kazakh leaders and intellectuals, which asked him to reconsider the doctrine and threatened an Independence Day (December 17) hunger strike unless he changes course.

17. (C) COMMENT: The difference between these two politicians' perception of Kazakhstani politics and the role of political parties is striking. Those on the outside, like Baimenov, see a monolithic, top-down process, in which President Nazarbayev unilaterally sets policy with little outside input. However, the conversation with Karin shows the variety of views within the Nur Otan party itself, some of which are quite liberal. Karin impressed us with his frankness, openness, and liberal mindset, especially if one considers that he is one of the chief strategists of the President's ruling party. END COMMENT.

